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SUBJECT: Netherlands: Justice and Housing Ministers Resign

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On September 21, Dutch Justice Minister Piet Hein Donner and Housing Minister Sybilla Dekker announced their resignations, less than two months before the November 22 national elections. The resignations followed the publication of a highly critical investigative report into the causes of a major fire at the Schiphol Airport detention center in October 2005 in which 11 detainees died. The current coalition government is expected to replace both ministers and will continue governing until the elections. While Dekker was not planning to run in the upcoming elections, Donner had been placed high on the Christian Democratic Alliance's (CDA) list of candidates; his political future is now an open question. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) The publication of a highly critical report by the Dutch Independent Safety Council into the causes of a fire at Schiphol Airport's detention center last October -- in which 11 detainees died -- has led to the resignation of two Dutch ministers. Justice Minister Piet Hein Donner of the Christian Democrats (CDA) and Housing Minister Sybilla Decker of the Liberal Party (VVD) publicly assumed responsibility for the failures of institutions under their supervision to comply with national fire safety standards. Donner is responsible for the Penitentiary Institutions Services Department, which administers the detention center at Schiphol, while Dekker is responsible for the Government Building Service, which owns the facility. Both ministers announced their resignations to the parliament following an emergency cabinet meeting called a few hours after the report's publication.

13. (U) The Safety Council report explicitly blamed the Ministry of Justice, the Government Building Service and the local council of Haarlemmermeer (which covers Schiphol airport) for failing to take measures to bring the facility into compliance with fire safety standards. The investigators concluded that the detention cells offered insufficient protection, and that the Penitentiary Institutions Service had primary responsibility for fire safety. The detention center's organization was described as "insufficiently" prepared, organized and trained to deal with such a calamity, so that prison staff attempting to deal with the blaze faced a virtually impossible task. Parliament is expected to debate the report and its conclusions in two weeks.

14. (SBU) COMMENT: The report's conclusions were so damaging that pressure for the ministers to resign would have mounted in the run-up to the parliamentary debate, diverting attention from the strong Dutch economy and other "good news" stories which form the basis of the CDA-VVD campaign strategy. The ministers' immediate resignation and acceptance of responsibility may take the sting out of the debate and help the parties conduct damage control. While Dekker already intended to leave politics before the November 22 elections, the popular Donner had just been

placed close to the top (number 5) of the CDA's candidate list. He has not yet indicated whether he plans to remain in the running or pull out..

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